

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Burt L. Burleson

“An Answer for Jackie”

An All Souls Day Sermon

November 5, 2006

*In the sweet, by and by, we shall meet on that beautiful shore.
In the sweet, by and by, we shall meet on that beautiful shore.*

*Some glad morning when this life is o'er, I'll fly away;
To a home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away.*

*I'll fly away, O glory, I'll fly away.
When I die, hallelujah, by and by, I'll fly away.*

*Just a few more weary days and then, I'll fly away;
To a land where joys shall never end, I'll fly away.*

*When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and time shall be no more,
And the morning breaks eternal, bright and fair –
When the saved of earth shall gather over on the other shore
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there!
When the roll is called up yonder, when the roll is called up yonder,
When the roll is called up yonder I'll be there.*

*O when the Saints, go marching in, O when the Saints go marching in,
O Lord I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in.*

*In the sweet, by and by, we shall meet on that beautiful shore.
In the sweet, by and by, we shall meet on that beautiful shore.*

What do you think about the afterlife? Though it's never too far from a Christian's front burner, we're not typically real focused on it. Maybe on a day like today, where we're observing All Saints and All Souls Day... we think of it.

The bible pushes us there with its poetry mostly and we wonder together what's on the other side... really?

And we know the right answers... **“Well, Jesus is there, of course... over yonder.”** But once you've gotten your “A” with that Sunday School answer... What will it be like, really? Today is one of those days... and it's a season of the church year when we try to read between the apocalyptic lines of scripture for a peak.

Most days, though, it's not on our minds and if it is, we're content with the images of scripture and songs we sing. We *cast an occasional wistful eye...*

At Canaan's Land... and at beautiful shores... pearly gates.

White robes... and wings... and mansions...

And streets of gold...

with people from New Orleans marching on them.

Or maybe if that imagery is too stained glass, we substitute our own “new revised” eschatological imagery of a golf courses or a trout stream or a chocolate factory.

Sometimes that's not enough though, is it? And some of you know exactly what I'm talking about.

A couple of years ago I lost a dear friend who was a brother to me and to Julie and uncle to our kids. This pulpit was given in his memory... Mark Johnson, my college roommate.

A couple of months after his unexpected death, his sister Jackie and I were talking and we got around to spiritual things and she said something like, "**Where is Mark?**"

And she wasn't asking about his eternal destination... And answering, "**heaven**" or "**with the Lord**" wouldn't do. She wanted a bit more than that. She was missing her brother, whom she was very close to, and she wanted to know about him.

Where was he?

What is happening to him?

What is he like?

What is he doing?

Singing, When We All Get to Heaven wouldn't have helped her... not in that moment.

And even now... having thought about it... I would have to say to her, "**We can't speak with much certain detail about it.**" John says that clearly, "**Now we're children of God but it's not yet been revealed what we'll be.**" Or if you prefer Paul, "**Now we see through a dark glass...**"

So that's why mostly we read the bible's poetry about it and we sing... sing about what it'll be like "when we all get to heaven and sing and shout the victory." But when we finally do talk of final things and what is beyond, its humble talk. We aren't going to know...

But still, from time to time, we can't help but try, huh. In the Creed we confess at its end, "**I believe in... the communion of the Saints... the resurrection of the body, and in the life to come.**"

We say that... or at least some Christians say that, they say it every Sunday. The Baptist version of that (by the way) is, *I'll Fly Away*. Our creeds were mostly sung... and some of them, theologically speaking, were poor substitutes and led to some inadequate thinking.

I want to do some good thinking with you out loud... most of the thoughts are borrowed from the Tradition, nothing new really... But I want you to imagine with me, use your mind and that other "inner mind," here observing All Saints Day... All Souls Day. What it's like on the other side? In the life to come?????

Where Mark is?

And your loved one.

And all the Saints.

Well... Imagine!!!! We believe in the Communion of the Saints... that there is a community and it's a communion that we are presently apart of.

Where's Mark? Well, nearer than you think. He's not up yonder... or over Jordan. He's more right here than "up there"... Beyond a door we can't see (almost never anyway) in a larger realm. And this larger realm contains the one we're in now. And it's one we access some... from time to time... maybe often if we're growing and mature.

But we're still anchored here in time and space and so our experience of this wider world is very, very, very limited. This other realm... The Eternal Now, contains our smaller now. It's bigger than time and space... History. Your today. Your experience... But... not distant or apart from it.

Paul says in Colossians, "**That all things were created in Him, in Christ, and that in Him, all things hold together.**"

He is the vine...

He is the Life...

He is the One Lord, above, all in all, and through all.

The image of the invisible God.

... The one "in whom we live and move and have our being."

And we are... "in Christ."

He is, as a friend wrote, "**mysteriously and majestically present at the heart of all creation, weaving and binding together time and the timely, form and tincture (essence) heaven and earth.**" (C. Bourgeault, The Body of Hope)

It is the Body of Christ, of which we are a part... Which is not simply a nice metaphor but a metaphysical, spiritual, mystical reality. It is true now and in the eternal now, we are occupying the same sacred space... so there is a *communion*.

There's a great cloud of witnesses watching, and if the Tradition is right, participating with us in some way... at least some souls have that capacity.

And the hard part is that we, on this side, have very little experience with that communion... We weep, like Jesus did, for the separation. It hurts and we weep and our tears honor what's real and incarnational.

But from time to time and perhaps more and more as we grow and open ourselves to the sacred... we get a sense of it... some breeze of it... some taste for it.

In Dostoyevsky's, *The Brothers of Karamazov*, the young monk Alyosha falls into a semi trance while listening to the gospel story of the Wedding at Cana read at his spiritual father's funeral. And later he walks out into the starry night and is filled with rapture, **"As though the threads from all those innumerable worlds of God met all at once in his soul."**

Father Bruno Barnhart writes in his commentary on the episode, **"In what seems to be an initiation into the fullness of the Holy Spirit, Alyosha comes suddenly into his manhood, filled with conviction and strength."** Alyosha would say afterwards. **"Someone visited my soul."** (as quoted in Bourgeault's *Love is Stronger than Death*).

Our awareness of this, or lack of it, does not change reality. The soul is connected to a larger realm in which we all abide.

We believe in the communion of the saints and the resurrection of the body...

Remember we're thinking about and trying to imagine the Life to come... and what scripture guides us to see and conceive of is a resurrection with Christ that, like Christ's', has form.

And this one is so difficult because we acknowledge that we're moving beyond the material realm... the sensible realm... full of form. But, as people of biblical faith, we say that even as we put off **"the perishable,"** we are putting on **"the imperishable."**

And we see Jesus at the transfiguration. He seems different but still we see him. And then, in the garden after the resurrection with Mary and with the apostles in numerous places. He's seen... has a body and its in continuity with his earthly appearance...

They recognize him...

touch him...

eat fish with him.

But it's different, right. It's not bound by the horizontal. Or another way to think of it, is that it is not bound by the opaqueness of the material in this fallen world. That's why in John's dream he sees a **"new heaven and a new earth."**

Christianity is a material religion...

There's a creation...

An intersection of Divine breath and earth.

Soul and body... interdependent.

Let me read for you from Kallistos Ware's book, *The Orthodox Way*.

"Man is not saved from his body but in it; not saved from the material world but with it. Because man is microcosm and mediator of the creation, his own salvation involves also the reconciliation and transfiguration of the whole animate and inanimate creation around him – its deliverance 'from bondage of corruption and entry 'into the glorious liberty of the children of God' (Romans 8: 21). In the new earth of the Age to come there is surely a place not only for man but for the animals; in and through man, they too will share in the immortality, and so will rocks, trees and plants, fire and water." (p137)

In other words, can you imagine the perfect without something as cute as a Yorkshire Terrier? Or the infinite without a Sunset? Or Heaven without a Texas Pecan? You can't, can you? No more than I can imagine my dear friend Mark, without his red hair and big smile and an infectious giggle.

We believe, **"in the resurrection of the Body..."** and in the communion of the Saints... and we believe in **"the life to come."**

At the moment of death... we believe that there is life... And all that life was meant to be. We see ourselves, in that moment, fully. As one writer put it, **“Everything we ever guessed at, sensed, and loved is before us, as we are totally present to ourselves, to the world, and to Christ.”** We see our true selves... that which, as Paul said, was **“hidden in Christ with God.”**

We are no longer blocked... and nothing in us is blocking so one mystic thinker says, **“The soul is pressed through with Divine Love and is illumined with God’s light as fire glows though iron by which it loses its darkness.”** (Boehme)

So, are you imagining???? In a moment there is a kind of quantum leap of personhood... into Being. And it’s not just that something has been thrown off but that some final element of who you are has been bestowed.

And it is utterly unique. I need you to see that. You aren’t lost into some cosmic oneness. There is, in the Christian faith, an affirmation of uniqueness... difference... Even as we celebrate unity and uniqueness now... we’re going to do that on the other side... and do that fully. That’s the metaphysical beauty of the Trinity... Completely one but uniquely three persons. And you, we, manifest that now and THEN.

I love the little verse in John’s Dream... in Revelation 2:7, **“To the one who overcomes... I will give a white stone, and on the stone a new name will be written, one known only to the one who receives it.”** Your identity is hidden with God.

So... in this life to come, Mark is more Mark than he has ever been... He has not lost the uniqueness of his one of a kind being. There’s an essence that was and is... Mark. He is Mark but more pure... the light of God flowing through him unfettered.

And he is continuing on becoming Mark. There is progress to be made... even in heaven. We move, as Paul says, **“from glory to glory.”**

Gregory of Nysaa said in the paradox of heaven that perfection consists precisely in never becoming perfect, but in always reaching forward to some higher perfection that lies beyond. The Fathers called it, *epektasis*. A constant reaching forward.

If in heaven we know Love completely then we will become... and become... and become because love always calls forth an emergence of being. Love evokes more of who you are. Doesn’t it always? (another idea from Cynthia p. 127)

So, Irenaeus would write, **“God will always have something more to teach man, and man will always have something more to learn from God.”** And that’s how sweet the *sweet by and by* is. There is always “a life to love.”

There are things we believe... and there’s lots we wonder about, even if it’s only from time to time. And there are deep questions and deep longings, especially when, like Jesus, we weep... for what has been lost.

A friend of mine wrote some lines once for a funeral of a young man... that are true if ever anything was true. **“There has to be another time. There has to be another place. Where all the love we ever, ever missed... is given by the fathers grace.”**

So... weep if it’s time to weep... but **“do not... do not... let your hearts be troubled.”** The future... our wonderful future is kept in God’s heart, who is our Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our end... who is making all things new and who will in time, dry every tear.

**Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet have trod;
With its crystal tide forever flowing by the throne of God?
Yes we’ll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river.
Gather with the saints at the river that flows from the throne of God.**